

Episode 136 - Dr. Brian Kelly: Superman in the Smallest Place: Exploring a Music Studio for Young People Experiencing Homelessness

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at W.W. dot. In social work dot org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're in social work. Hi everyone. One of the interesting things about living less than 30 minutes from a natural wonder like Niagara Falls is that you never get tired of the amazing things you see there. Here in February a combination of the water the cold and mist creates a natural ice bridge that traverses the nagger River and connects the U.S. and Canada. An amazing sight. I'm Peter Sobota a significant part of literature related to homeless youth describes the risk that predispose their homelessness and the consequences they experience after they become homeless. In this episode our guest Dr. Brian Kelly takes a strength based approach to services with this population and asks about the effectiveness of utilizing music based activities in order to engage young people's strengths specifically drawing on principles of positive youth development. Dr. Kelly wonders does and to what extent would involvement in a music studio in a transitional living program do to engage and promote the resilience and strengths of young people experiencing homelessness. Incorporating a few samples of the young person's work he details his study and findings as well as the implications for social work practice. Brian Kelly Ph.D. is assistant professor at Loyola University of Chicago's School of Social Work.

[00:01:59] His research explores current and historical uses of recreational art and music based activities and social work and related fields as sites and opportunities for strings based social work practice. In addition Dr. Kelly is an advocate for the advancement of social work practice with groups and teaches group courses at the graduate level. Dr. Kelly was interviewed by Steven Schwartz research associate at the UB School of Social Work. Buffalo Center for Social Research Steven and Dr. Kelly recorded their interview in January of 2014. Brian can you tell us how the study emerged from your passion for music. Sure. So as a young person as a boy I had a passion for music both listening to and playing music. And as I grew older into adolescence I began to pick up a variety of instruments throughout my youth. I played a little bit of piano a little bit a guitar little bit of drums I started singing and I was involved in theatre as well and then as I really came into my adolescence I had some musical mentors in my life. And when I say musical mentors I don't necessarily just mean like teachers or music instructors. These were adults who were musicians themselves friends of mine's parents peers parents and so on who are musicians that took an interest and my interest and my friends and peers interest in music as well. And they really helped us foster that passion and kind of manifested in our bands that we played in two different recording projects and so on and so as I grew older into later adolescence and early 20s I actually pursued an associate's degree in audio engineering and received that degree in my early 20s. And so I took a stab at being a working musician and musical engineer.

[00:03:53] And as anyone knows who tries to be a working artist it wasn't easy going. So I decided that I needed to supplement what I was doing and so I came back to school and I started taking courses and Human Services which eventually led me to pursue a degree in addictions counseling and from there I got involved in social work. The undergraduate and then at the master's level once I had my certification and addictions treatment I began doing some consulting work for an agency in Chicago on the south side and the neighborhood called Bronzeville. Then I'll talk about a little bit later and what I was doing there as I was doing some harm reduction groups for young people who were homeless or formerly homeless. This was a transitional living program. And as you might imagine your listeners might imagine these young people were not necessarily fully interested in coming to substance use harm reduction at all. Many of them used marijuana and other recreational

drugs as a form of managing and coping with the stress of being homeless. So there were two young men in particular who were supposed to be attending my group and they did not come to group and one day I was kind of walking around the agency this residential agency looking for the young men and I found them in the basement of the agency working on music and rather than pulling them out of that space and saying Now come on guys it's time to come to group.

[00:05:22] I decided to just kind of stand there and observe and witness what was going on with these young men and I realized in that moment there was something happening there I didn't know if it was a service or a program or an intervention or what was actually happening but I knew that there was something very important happening for them and I knew that on a personal level from my own experience of engagement with music. But I also knew that on more of a clinical professional level that there was something happening here for these young men. And what I came to understand later is that they were engaging their strengths in some way. So eventually when I came back to pursue my Ph.D. I decided that I wanted to do a study on this music studio space in this agency. And my first engagement with that space was probably in the mid 2000s and when I went back to really empirically look at it it was about eight years later and at that point the studio became a fully functioning space. And so that's how I came to kind of engage in the study. Well would you describe for us the conceptual framework for your study and why you titled it Superman in the small space. A sure thing. So is really three concepts that are kind of driving this study. And the first of which is strength's strengths perspective and just as the kind of very brief summary this idea of the strength perspective is this notion that individuals inherently have a wealth of resources to draw upon to overcome traumatic events that seemingly threaten their ability to cope. And so what we're really saying with this drink's perspective is that we acknowledge that people experience trauma but that can't define who they are when we approach our work with them.

[00:07:06] So it's very clear that the strength perspective leans very heavily on the idea of resiliency. And so for me in my study I was really interested in ecological resiliency because for myself from my own practice experience and my read of various forms of literature on resiliency I find that resiliency doesn't just exist within the individual but exist within their environment as well. And it's really the kind of symbiotic relationship between individual and their environment that fosters resiliency and then the third concept is this idea of the model of positive development. And when I speak of positive youth development I'm talking explicitly about the Federal Government's kind of idea of what that is and that's a holistic approach to working with young people in terms of programme implementation and delivery and that holistic approach considers the young person that the biological psychological mental emotional and spiritual level. And the reason I've included that positive youth development model is because the agency explicitly subscribes to that model of working with young people and so the study is really in the center of those three concepts which again are that strength perspective ecological resiliency and positive youth development. Now in terms of how the name of the study came about Superman and the smallest space is actually a quote from one of the young people who I worked with on an audio documentary that actually presents some of the findings from the study and a fuck about your documentary a little bit more later.

[00:08:46] But this young person was describing how she felt when she was in the studio and her name is smurf and she talks about the studio being this kind of physically small space but what she's in that space she feels larger than life because she's able to engage in her passions and what brings her true joy in her life and that get through the sense of strength and bolsters her confidence and her ability then to go out into the world and do what she needs to do to function and once you reviewed the literature and found some gaps I did yeah. And so when we look at youth homelessness literature I should say when I look at the Youth Homelessness literature but I don't think I'm the only one that has found this. What I found was that the majority of the research really focuses on the risks and consequences perspective what I call the risks and consequences perspective and what that is is that a lot of the research looks at the risks that lead to young people experiencing

homelessness. OK and a lot of that is defined broadly as family conflict and many ways. And then what we also tend to see is this writing and research about the consequences that young people experience while they're homeless and as a result of their homelessness and a lot of that kind of gets categorised into medical and behavioral health problems and also criminal justice involvement. For Young People Now having said that there is some literature that looks at the strength of young people experiencing homelessness but it's a fairly small body of literature.

[00:10:22] Another body of literature I looked at was the literature exploring and looking at homeless youth services what I found is that there's very little empirical work regarding the effectiveness of services for young people experiencing homelessness and the third body of literature I looked at was literature exploring the utilization of recreational art and music based services and social work and related fields. And what I found was that we as social workers and other related disciplines are using recreational art and music based activities to engage adults and young people quite often. And so to kind of review these gaps again what I found was that youth homelessness literature is primarily framed from a risk and consequences perspective. There's little empirical knowledge regarding the effectiveness of homeless youth services. And again social work in related fields are effectively using recreational art and music services to engage young people's strengths. So how did you go about addressing these gaps that you found in the literature. Well I set out to do a couple of things very intentionally Steve what I wanted to do was I wanted to challenge the focus on risks and consequences and actually delinquency as well. And youth homelessness research I wanted to develop a study that would add to the growing empirical literature on the strengths and accomplishments of young people experiencing homelessness. I sought to contribute to the growing knowledge base on homeless youth services and I also wanted to develop a study that would explore music based services as a way to engage young people experiencing homelessness. And so I developed three research questions and three research questions are what processes are involved in promoting and developing a music studio transitional living program for young people experiencing homelessness. The second question is What are young people's experiences while engaging in the music studio. And the third question is what meaning they attach to their experiences.

[00:12:33] And there is this kind of fourth question that I didn't explicitly explore with young people and staff of the agency but that some that that very much emerged through data analysis and through writing up the data. And it's this idea of whether or not involvement in the music studio promotes young people's personal strengths and if so how does it. And so these questions are really looking at the processes that led to the development of the studio. Young people's experiences in the studio and the meanings that they attach their experiences. And then this idea again of whether or not involvement in the studio promotes young people's personal strengths. That's very interesting. What were the methods you use to address these four questions. Well given that we know very little about this phenomenon. When I reviewed the literature I really did not find anything that talked about young people experiencing homelessness and their engagement in the studio and whether or not that engagement would promote personal strengths. I decided that I needed to start at the very beginning of developing a knowledge base around this phenomenon. So I used ethnographic methods to explore the studio and so what I did was I engaged in participant observation in the studio. I also engaged in conducting semi structured interviews with young people who engaged in the studio and staff who engaged in the studio as well.

[00:14:06] And then I also conducted some key informant interviews with agency staff and so the key informant interviews were really the main mechanism for getting an understanding of process he's involved in promoting and developing the studio and then participant observation and semi structured interviews with young people and staff who engage the studio were my main mechanisms for getting at an understanding of young people's experiences in the studio and the meaning they attach to their experiences. In addition to those more traditional ethnographic methods

I decided they wanted to do something kind of unique for this study and it's something that lent itself very well to the field side. And that is developing a code constructed audio documentary that would explore young people's experiences in the music studio and the meaning they attached their experiences and I want to just talk very briefly about the relevance to audio documentary for this project and that this was a sonic space. It was an aural space and that's not oral. That's aural or aural quality of the space lent itself very well to a sonic representation of the data. And so I really wanted to incorporate this into the project and I was able to secure some funds to support the development of this component of the project. And I also found it to be a really exceptional supplementary method in the way that it brought a participatory dimension to the project it actually allowed a small team of young people to not only be research participants but to actually be in some ways coal investigators for this part of the project. And it also created opportunities for those young people to expand their relationship with media production. So my hope there was that after engaging in this Koch constructed audio documentary with me they might then decide to go out and tell other stories of strength and resilience that they've experienced in their own life. So very briefly data collection occurred between July of 2011 and July of 2012.

[00:16:23] And I gauged in about six months of participant observation and in total I conducted interviews with 14 participants altogether and I had four young people help me out and assist me with the development of the audio documentary. Tell me a bit about Bronzeville the site for your research. Absolutely. So Bronzeville is a neighborhood on the South East Side of Chicago and it's not too far south. That's just out of what we also call the south loop and Bronzeville historically served as kind of an entree into Chicago for people that migrated north during the Great Migration. So the great African-American migration in the earlier part of the 20th century and what was happening at that time was that as Bronzeville which was at that time known as the Black Belt became saturated with these people migrating from the south to the north. There were rich tapestry of African-American owned businesses. There was a growing African-American middle class. At that time and as a result of that there was kind of this great art based community developing as well. That was only rivaled by the Harlem renaissance at the time and there were great authors that lived in Chicago in this neighborhood at that time such as Richard Wright the author of Native Son. And there were exceptional musicians who came up during that time as well. Both jazz and blues legends. And what happened over time was that eventually the more middle class African-American families left the neighborhood which removed a lot of the social and economic support for people that were still migrating up north. And over time throughout the 40s and 50s in the 60s and into the 70s the neighborhood fell into disarray and poverty and there's often comes with that we saw increased criminal activity.

[00:18:27] And today the neighborhood is in a bit of a regional vocation process. The neighborhoods being gentrified in many ways. But what has remained in the neighborhoods throughout all of this is this interest and support of the arts and it's manifested in several ways through the dozens of mural projects that exist in the neighborhood as well as the monuments to the great artists and statues and murals that exist throughout the neighborhood as well. So there's always been an interest in the arts in this neighborhood and it's interesting to me that this agency that's centered in this neighborhood is aware of the rich history of music and art that exist in that neighborhood and that when I interviewed staff about the development of the studio many of them cited the pride that they have that they reside. The agency resides in Bronzeville and that they're able to have this kind of art based music based space within the agency and see it as an interesting thread between themselves and kind of pulling the legacy of Bronzeville and Brownsville support of the arts through to their agency. And that's a little bit about the studio as well. So the studio is a shared space. It's a flex space and it serves as a conference room for the agency by day and a studio for the young people to engage in. By night that's a very kind of naturally lit room with lots of windows and the studio equipment exists in a locked box that the young people go through an orientation and the training that they can have access to the equipment.

[00:20:08] And then once they go through the orientation they can access that equipment any time the studio is open and the studio equipment basically consists of an eye mask with several pieces of audio software and hardware that the young people are digitally trained to use. And so what I'd like to do now is I'd actually like to play just a brief sample of a piece of music that a young man by the name of Theo worked on in the studio to give you Steve and the listeners an idea of what some of the music that these people worked on in the studio sounds like. Well that was interesting. Now tell us what were your findings that addressed the four research questions that you asked. Sure. So the first research question which is this question and I use them structured interviews with staff members to explore this we're looking at the processes involved in promoting and developing the music studio. And so what I found was that key informants described how the music studio developed by applying a positive youth development informed strengths based approach to programming that explicitly promoted holistic services. And when I speak of holistic services that includes educational recreational and vocational services. Now it wasn't just the development of those programs but it was also the inclusion of young people at the table with their little voices being included in program development. And so this is one of the key things about positive youth development. And I saw it manifesting in many ways in the interviews that I did with staff is that it wasn't just about developing programs that young people were interested in. It was about bringing them into the program development process.

[00:22:29] Now it wasn't just bringing young people into program development that really led to the development of the space. There was also a staff member by the name of Hermann who played an intrinsic role in the development of the studio. He served as a studio advocate and so it was really the synthesis of those kind of three things this commitment to posit youth development the promotion of holistic services and the inclusion of young people's voice in the development of holistic services and the studio advocate on staff that really promoted the development of the music studio space in terms of the second question looking at young people's experiences in the studio. What I found were that young people really engaged in three different types of activities or experiences in the studio space and those were collaborative and independent music perception. Reciprocal music education and reflective music appreciation and a walk through each of those briefly. So in terms of working collaboratively what I found was that young people saw each other out and developed collaborations based on existing skills that they had and those skills could be singing they could be playing an instrument they could beat production or they could have been mastering or music engineering skills and in seeking each other out and developing these collaborations they developed various roles in the studio that could be one of producer or one of performer for example and as they developed these roles they formed connections with each other and they engaged in various forms of creative expression and had fun while they were doing it. In addition they experienced relational challenges and frustrations within their collaboration.

[00:24:19] And what I found was that these relational challenges and frustrations often provided young people with opportunities to develop important interpersonal and interpersonal skills including the ability to compromise and negotiate increased confidence in one's role within the collaboration and also the ability to persevere and work under pressure. Now in terms of working independently what I found was that young people experienced and worked through significant technical challenges that provided them with opportunities to develop interpersonal as well as interpersonal skills. And whenever I talk about this working independently and overcoming technical challenges. I always think back to a young man by the name of Marcus who would spend hours in the studio working through technical challenges. He in particular was interested in beat production and would always butt up against challenges and working with the software that he used and he would use youtube videos he would pull on other young people and ask their thoughts and try and get their feedback and he just would not give up until he overcame the challenge and the feeling of confidence and support that manifested in him and working through these challenges was

a really strong indication to me that he was developing interpersonal skills as he was overcoming these challenges. And then in terms of the interpersonal skill development he would then go out pull young people in and demonstrate to them and then teach them how they too could do the skill that he had just developed and so what he was doing in many ways was demonstrating in another tenet of positive youth development and sharing the mastery of that skill with other young people. Now in terms of music education and the TNP music studio it's a reciprocal process right. And it's this idea where staff educate young people and then young people educate themselves and others including staff.

[00:26:19] And so this reciprocal music education process provides young people with important opportunities to connect with staff and each other enhanced existing and develop new skills strengths and talents opportunities to work through technical challenges and gain a sense of accomplishment and pride in doing so which the example I just gave Marcus is a great example of that and then gaining a sense of generosity and mastery and sharing that skill with others which again is this clear manifestation of positive development how it's working in the studio space. Now in terms of this idea of reflective of music appreciation. What I found was that young people would also oftentimes just use this space to engage with music they wouldn't necessarily be working on music production. They wouldn't necessarily be working on music education either they would just kind of be in there listening to music much like I or maybe yourself Steve or some of the listeners out there might do when they put on a record or a CD or listened to an MP 3 and we just kick back and enjoy some music. But what I found was that there was kind of this unique process going on when young people were doing that and that they were appreciating the music themselves but they were also often educating others about that music and whether that be another young person appear myself as the researcher or other staff as well. And in doing this appreciating and educating the music there was also this recreational component going on and so what I found was that there was this connection here. This reflects of connection between appreciation education and recreation.

[00:28:03] And what I'd like to share briefly is that staff talked about one staff member particular by the name Z talked about how these moments of music appreciation often offered staff a time to engage with young people because it was a time when young people were willing to open up and share some of their interests with staff and staff and saw those moments as opportunities not only to just simply engage young person in dialogue but to build a relationship with them. And when we're talking about young people who have experienced homelessness various forms of trauma they're oftentimes reluctant to connect with others. And so these moments offer these really unique opportunities for connections. And what I'd like to do now is I would like to play another sample of music that was developed in the studio and this track is called. It's on and it was developed by Marcus and one of the reasons I really liked this track is that it's a very upbeat piece. He played it quite often and he was really proud of this and this piece is the result of some of Marcus very hard work in overcoming some technical challenges. Let's give it a listen. It's wonderful to literally hear Marcus's voice on that recording. Well maybe you could pick up and give us some of your findings on the third question dealt with what were the meanings the young people attach to their experience. Absolutely.

[00:30:06] And so I'll note that these findings really resulted out of the conversations that I had with young people and so it was those kind of micro conversations that occurred during observations and then the length of a year more in-depth conversations that we had during interviews so young people described and frame their experiences in the studios as opportunities for connection and engagement with other young people and staff. They also talked about their experiences in the studio as opportunities for expression and as a space for creativity and specifically that the studio serves as a creative outlet for them. They also described the studio as a place where they experienced technical and relational challenges and frustrations but they really noted that through working through these challenges and frustrations they ultimately described the studio as a space of

opportunity where they can connect engage and creatively express themselves by collaboratively or independently engaging in various forms of music production education and appreciation. And then in terms of this final research question that again I didn't explicitly ask young people or staff about but that kind of emerged through data analysis and writing up the data. This idea of whether or not involvement in the studio promotes personal strengths and if so how did it. I really believe that my time spent in the studio with young people and the extensive ethnographic data I collected really demonstrates that young people do engage existing strengths talents interests and that they develop new talent strengths and interests in the studio. And this is something that I do plan to continue exploring in additional studies in Chicago. I'm currently in the process of developing my next study which will be a similar ethnographic case study and I hope to do several more. As I continue to build on this body of literature that really looks at and in empirical fashion how as social workers we can engage music activities and in doing so engage young people experiencing homelessness in those activities. And what could result from that.

[00:32:27] So what does this all mean for the social worker in the field or in the classroom. That's a great question. So what I believe this study does is it does several things. First of all it challenges the dominant risks and consequences narrative in youth homelessness research and literature that I described earlier and what it also does is it adds to the small but growing body of literature exploring young people experiencing homelessness strengths. And I want to say that in no way do I want to deny the traumatic events that young people experience while they're homeless. Nor do I want to downplay the extremely important and relevant research that people are doing looking at the risks and consequences young people experiencing homelessness face. But I think we need to paint a bigger picture of these young people because my practice experience and the past experience of many others who work with these young people suggests that simply getting to an agency and surviving the experience of homelessness indicates that these young people have strengths. So I just want to present a more fuller picture and I believe that the study begins to do that. In addition it highlights the potential for the implementation of a strength based positive youth development informed approach to working with young people.

[00:33:49] In addition it builds on the current uses of recreational art and music based activities and extends the utilization of these services to young people experiencing homelessness and something I'd like to add to that is that although I focused on how these services are used currently I want to be real clear that social work as a profession has been using these recreational art and music based activities to engage young people and adults from the very beginning of our profession if we go back to the settlement house movement particularly if we look at holehouse which I did in my lit review you can see that Jane Adams and the other settlement house workers really use these services to bring people in and to engage them in other types of activities. And so it's not that I'm necessarily building on a new kind of literature here. What I'm really trying to do is pull a thread through of the last 100 plus years of social work practice and show that we've used these activities all along and we could continue to use them to engage those who are defined as most vulnerable and hard to reach. Brian I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. Appreciate your passion. And we look forward to more conversations and much more music in the future. Thank you. Thank you Steve you've been listening you to Dr. Brian Kelly discuss the effectiveness of utilizing music based activities to engage homeless youth strengths in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu